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Beyond the Single Story

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A thoughtful world literature curriculum helps students challenge stereotypes and develop empathy.

In her TED talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) explains how one-sided media coverage often creates a limited, one-dimensional picture of an entire people, robbing them of their dignity. Adichie, a native of Nigeria, is primarily referring to the West's perception of Africa as a single country, full of "beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves, and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner." But such "single stories" affect people of other backgrounds as well: Russians, Mexicans, Muslims, African Americans, Chinese, Japanese, and others. Often, the media "show a people as one thing, as only one thing over and over again," says Adichie. "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete."

In world literature courses, teachers have an opportunity to explore the more complex reality beyond the single story of other cultures, thus preparing students for the multicultural society of the 21st century. To achieve this end, many English language arts teachers have revamped their world literature courses and integrated multicultural units into their curriculum, studying *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (Riverhead, 2003) and *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (HarperCollins, 2010) alongside more traditional selections like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *Crime and Punishment*. But these efforts, albeit well-intentioned, often fail to move beyond the single story of other cultures.

For example, when our students read *Not Without My Daughter* by Betty Mahmoody (St. Martin's Press, 1987), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini (Bloomsbury, 2009), or *Sold* by Patricia McCormick (Hyperion Paperbacks for Children, 2006), they often come away with two lessons: (1) how lucky they are to live in the United States, and (2) how horrible it must be to grow up in other countries. These texts rightfully bring our attention to serious problems in Iran, Afghanistan, and Nepal respectively; but used in isolation, each presents only one view of a people. There are plenty of other narratives—narratives of kindness, enterprise, and success—that our students don't have a chance to experience.

The definition of *sympathy* is feeling sorry for another person's misfortune, whereas *empathy* is understanding and sharing the feelings of another. One-sided accounts of other cultures may lead our students to develop a condescending attitude of sympathy and minimize their opportunities to understand another people. As teachers, we should ensure that our students have opportunities to experience empathy and thus become respectful human beings. I've tried to accomplish this in my world literature classes by providing context, encouraging self-reflection, and exploring controversial points of view that shake up the stereotypes.

Providing Context

I begin by setting the context to make the literature we examine relevant to my students. Before reading texts from the Middle East, for instance, I ask my students to examine the *Time* magazine article "Islamophobia: Does America Have a Muslim Problem?" (Ghosh, 2010) coupled with other articles about criticisms leveled at the television program "All-American Muslim" (Davidson, 2011; Poniewozik, 2011). The first source gets the students talking about the false assumptions about Muslims in our country; the second source catches them by surprise as they learn that some Muslims wear tattoos and piercings and that most Muslims in the United States have loving families, go to school, and keep regular jobs—all stories my students don't usually hear. Then, we list existing stereotypes that compose the "single story" about Islam and its followers; this story becomes the focus of our Middle East unit of study.

Before studying South American literature, we read an article on the international demand for quinoa and its consequences for Bolivian farmers (Friedman-Rudovsky, 2012) and another on *bio-piracy*—the threat of more powerful nations appropriating control of smaller countries' valuable natural resources (Jackson, 2009). We examine the term *gringo*, with its negative connotations. We watch *Amazon Adventures*, a 2006 History Channel program, from which students learn about Henry Ford's Fordlandia project in Brazil, Chico Mendes' environmental efforts, and the rubber boom and the resulting exploitation of the Bora-Bora tribe. We read *The Old Man Who Read Love*


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Stories by Luis Sepúlveda, "Axolotl" by Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar, and "The Handsomest Drowned Man" by Gabriel García Márquez among others. Throughout the unit, we discuss fair trade, focusing on how foreigners have affected the South American people in both positive and negative ways. Which brings me to the second essential aspect of teaching world literature: To help students develop empathy, we must encourage self-reflection.

Encouraging Self-Reflection

Throughout our students' studies, we need to remind them to reflect on themselves. U.S. students are seldom asked to think about our nation's impact on the rest of the world; yet national self-reflection is essential in the environment where groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda gain support through their hatred of the United States. Our students need to understand why many people in Africa and the Middle East resent Americans, why Russia is building up its military arsenal to defend itself against U.S. "aggression," and why *gringo* is not a complimentary term. Understanding the roots of other people's discontent gives us knowledge that will help us coexist with other nations peaceably.

When students read blog posts like "More than 100 Teens Have Been Sentenced to Die in Iran" (Cook, 2016), we should point out that many children in the United States also face various forms of victimization (Rocheleau & Rosen, 2016). Whatever negative stories about other countries our students encounter, we must urge reflection: Are all minors better off in the United States? How many U.S. residents live below the poverty line? How many U.S. women are victims of marital abuse? How are we dealing with racism in this country? Although as a group we are generally much better off than people in Nepal, our students must see that, even so, there are still too many U.S. citizens living in poverty and subjected to crime, corruption, prostitution, and abuse. "You must be the change you wish to see in the world," said Mahatma Gandhi; we must make an effort to adhere to his words.

Shaking Up Stereotypes

Finally, to develop students' empathy, we need to continually deconstruct our students' feeling of comfort. For instance, after we read *Thousand Splendid Suns*, I ask my students to list everything they've learned about men and women in Afghanistan. Their lists usually include statements such as "Women are forced into marriages," "Women are abused by their husbands," "Women have no rights," "Women are forced to marry at 14," "Women are valued only if they give birth to boys," and so on. When their lists are complete, I ask students to find anything contradicting their statements in that same novel. Surprised and unsure at first, students soon discover that, even though Mariam's father Jalil is a despicable coward, he never abuses any of his wives (in fact, his wives reign over him). Further, Jalil himself is often abused by Mariam's mother; Laila's father treats his wife with love and respect even when she is rather unreasonable; Laila's father believes in the importance of education for his daughter; Tariq and Laila get married because they love each other, not because they are forced; Laila's parents married for love as well; women had more rights in Afghanistan before the Taliban took over; and female teachers and doctors are mentioned throughout the book. Through this exercise, students notice the less obvious voices in the text—voices that help them realize that not every Afghan woman is repressed and not every Muslim man is a fiend.

To rattle the existing stereotypes even further, I bring up an article by Naomi Wolf (2008) in which she discusses Muslim women's attitude towards chadors. Some of the women she interviews say something like this:

When I wear Western clothes, men stare at me, objectify me, or I am always measuring myself against the standards of models in magazines, which are hard to live up to—and even harder as you get older—not to mention how tiring it can be to be on display all the time. When I wear my headscarf or chador, people relate to me as an individual, not an object; I feel respected.

Our students often believe that headscarves and burqas are signs of female subjugation; Wolf's article offers a different perspective, broadening the story.

In our Middle East unit, my students read and discuss selections from Greg Mortenson's memoir *Three Cups of Tea* (Viking Penguin, 2006); parts of *The Qur'an* (some pertaining to the treatment of women and their marital rights, and others pertaining to notions of peace and aggression); and articles about self-burning and domestic violence against women in Afghanistan (Rubin, 2010) and "honor" killings in Pakistan (Gannon, 2016). They read a few selections from the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (FQ Classics, 2011) that touch on the pleasure of living and questions about the afterlife, and selections from *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* (Oxford Story Collections, 2000), in which we encounter powerful (both evil and generous) women and devout and honorable men. Finally, we view *Children of Heaven*, a 1997 Iranian film about a caring and supportive family. Only after we've encountered multiple stories and discussed multiple perspectives do I ask my students to reflect on their understanding of the Muslim culture. For their final project, students choose five common stereotypes about Muslims and explain how each one, although partially accurate, does not represent the entire story.

As Chimamanda Adichie says, we need to make sure that our students learn more than the single story. When we teach about Sierra Leone, we need to make an effort to read something besides the former child soldier's account in *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah (Sarah Crichton Books, 2007). When we show the film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), our students should learn about both negative and positive reactions to the film in India; they should also learn about Indian politics and economics to determine which parts of the film are true to life and which parts are not.

A Brave and Open-Minded Curriculum

According to the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (n.d.), global awareness is one of the essential 21st century skills; our students need to learn from and work "collaboratively with individuals representing diverse cultures, religions and lifestyles in a spirit of mutual respect and open dialogue in personal, work and community contexts." If we want to forge strong relationships with other nations, we need to respect people of different backgrounds.

A world literature curriculum that enhances this kind of global awareness must embrace controversy, dive headfirst into contradictory perspectives, and encourage critical thinking. Such a curriculum requires brave and open-minded teachers—and learners. Although I strongly believe in teaching classic texts like *Gulliver's Travels*, *Don Quixote*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Metamorphosis*, as teachers we need to expand our definition of world literature and make sure our students have opportunities to read beyond the single story.

EL Online

For more ways to help students understand other cultures, see the online article "[Entrées to Global Understanding](#)" by William Kist.

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